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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000359

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SUBJECT: MAY 7 FELTMAN-SHAPIRO MEETING IN DAMASCUS:
ISRAELI-SYRIAN PEACE ISSUES

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Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: In a wide-ranging May 7 discussion on differing U.S. and Syrian approaches to re-engagement, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman and NSC/NENA Senior Director Shapiro stressed President Obama's strong commitment to achieving comprehensive peace in the region, including a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians and peace between Syria and Israel. The President would host Israeli PM Netanyahu May 18, and PA President Abbas and Egyptian President Mubarak would visit shortly thereafter. The Syrian side led by FM Muallim praised the President's rhetoric and said President Asad had told a long string of visitors about the importance of supporting him. They nonetheless complained repeatedly that Special Envoy Mitchell had visited Morocco instead of Syria, raising questions about how serious the U.S. was about promoting comprehensive peace. Feltman and Shapiro explained that Mitchell was seeking to build a wide consensus in the Arab world that would be necessary to succeed in achieving comprehensive peace; he would visit Damascus soon. Muallim said Syria was ready to move to direct talks with Israel once Israel met its conditions on the June 4, 1967 line. Syria hoped the U.S. would take a lead role in these negotiations and act as a guarantor once an agreement was reached. Depending on Israel's position, Syria would be willing to resume indirect talks with Turkish mediation as a means of reaching agreement on the June 4 line. Muallim welcomed U.S. consultations with Turkey, but said Syria would not allow U.S. officials to view Syrian documents deposited with the Turks. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) Returning to Damascus two months after their March 7 visit, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro met May 7 for four-and-a-half hours with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad, and President Asad's Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban. Charge and Pol-Econ Chief (notetaker) accompanied Feltman and Shapiro. Muallim's Chief of Staff Bassam Sabagh joined the Syrian side. This cable focuses on their discussions on Israeli-Syrian peace issues. It should be read with septel reports on general views of re-engagement, Iraq, sanctions, Palestinian reconciliation, Iran, Lebanon, and human rights.

Syrians Anxious for Mitchell Visit

13. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director Shapiro expressed President Obama's commitment to a two-state solution and achieving comprehensive peace between Israel and its neighbors, including Syria. The President would be meeting Israeli PM Netanyahu on May 18 in Washington, and PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak would be visiting shortly after. These meetings would be opportunities to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to moving forward with a peace agenda. FM Muallim replied the Syrian government welcomed the U.S. administration's positive messages on comprehensive peace. President Asad had urged visiting diplomats and leaders to support President Obama because of his genuine commitment to regional peace. Asad had even told Iranian President Ahmedinejad on April 5 that Syria would continue to pursue peace discussions with Israel. "The Iranians don't like it, but they recognize that we have the right to pursue what is in our national interests," Muallim said.

14. (S/NF) Muallim expressed concern, however, that the U.S. seemed to be sending mixed signals to Syria. He asked what was behind the U.S. philosophy of inviting Jordanian King Abdullah, PM Netanyahu, and President Mubarak to Washington, while sending Special Envoy Mitchell to Morocco and Secretary Clinton to Lebanon. "We're involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. We assure you we're ready to move now if the Israelis are," Muallim said. "We approve of Obama's declarations on comprehensive peace and a two-state solution. What else is needed?"

15. (S/NF) Shapiro replied that nothing else would be required to begin talks, but the U.S. was now focused on

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doing the necessary due diligence to improve their chances of succeeding. Senator Mitchell would be coming to Syria to discuss how to engage on the Syria-Israeli track. His discussions would be informed by a better understanding of Israel's position after PM Netanyahu's meetings in Washington. Mitchell believed all parties have a role to play. In light of the Gaza crisis, the immediate U.S. focus is on the Palestinian Authority's need for support, Shapiro explained. Feltman added that when Senator Mitchell came to Syria, he would want to hear about Syria's indirect talks with Israel. To prepare for Mitchell's arrival in Damascus, it would help if Mitchell's deputy, Fred Hof, could visit Ankara to get a debrief from the Turks.

16. (S/NF) Muallim replied that Mitchell had already visited Turkey and received a briefing from new Turkish FM Davutoglu, who at that time was an advisor to PM Erdogan. The Turks wanted a role with the U.S., and Muallim reported he had heard President Obama, during his visit to Istanbul, had encouraged them to play a role in facilitating talks with Israel. Was this true? asked Muallim.

Future U.S. Roles in Peace Negotiations

17. (S/NF) The U.S. role would be up to the parties to decided, responded Feltman. What did Syria want? he asked. If the parties were ready, did Syria prefer to have the U.S. in the background with the Turks taking the lead? First, replied Muallim, we would need to agree on the terms of reference -- UNSCRs 242 and 338 and the Arab Peace Initiatives. Shapiro stipulated the U.S. would agree to these documents. The objective, Muallim continued, would be a comprehensive solution among all the parties directly involved in the dispute. The talks would have to lead to real peace after Israel's withdrawal from occupied Arab territories. From Syria's point of view, Turkey would be important to "the first phase." If Israel were ready to

re-start indirect talks, Syria would also be willing, provided the same conditions that applied to earlier indirect talks continued to apply -- namely, there would be negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, any Israeli military action in Lebanon or Gaza would lead to a cessation of talks, and Israel agreed to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 line. The indirect talks were important, Muallim explained, because they would contribute a description of the June 4 line and security arrangements between the two sides.

¶8. (S/NF) If and when the indirect talks moved to formal, direct negotiations, Syria saw the U.S. role as being "a real partner," Muallim opined. "We don't need a new Road Map or new initiative, but rather practical steps and political will to achieve action," he said. Feltman responded that the continuation of indirect talks might require a need for the U.S. to keep Israel involved. He proposed to wait and see what developed as a result of PM Netanyahu's visit to Washington. If Syria and Israel decided to continue indirect talks, it would be useful for Mitchell to be well briefed on the substance. Therefore, Feltman suggested, it would be useful if Mitchell's deputy, Fred Hof, went to Ankara to discuss the details of the indirect talks.

Indirect or Direct Talks with Israel?

¶9. (S/NF) Muallim replied that Israel would first need to respond to Syria's six points describing the June 4, 1967 line, and Syria would need to respond to Israel's questions on security arrangements. Shapiro asked whether there was any reason for the U.S. not to have access to the same information available to the Turks. Muallim responded, "The Turks are in charge of carrying Israel's position." Syria remained focused on defining the June 4 line as a condition to moving to direct talks. "Bring us Netanyahu's approval on our six points and we'll supply you with our paper" Muallim said. Shapiro sought clarification on whether Syria would share its answers on the security arrangements. "Syria is

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focused on the June 4 line," responded Muallim. "And Israel will tell us they are focused on getting Syria's answers to the security arrangements," answered Feltman, saying Mitchell would probably ask when he visited Damascus. "We answered them," Miqdad said.

¶10. (S/NF) Muallim reported Syria had agreed with Israel on a sequence of events to reaching direct negotiations. The Turks, he clarified, knew the substance because they had provided a depository for Israel and Syria. Syria was ready to resume indirect talks if Israel indicated it would be willing to discuss Syria's six points on the June 4 line. Whether the U.S. would enter the discussions before Syria and Israel moved to direct negotiations would be up to the U.S. and Turkey. Charge asked whether all of this would be discussed again when Mitchell visited Syria. Muallim asked, "What do you expect us to do? Give up our demand that Israel withdraw to the June 4 line?" Charge responded that she was not suggesting Syria alter its negotiation position, but it would be useful for Syria to review its position and give Mitchell something with which he could work.

¶11. (S/NF) Feltman asked what, in fact, would Mitchell do when he came to Damascus? "What he did in Morocco, or twice in Israel, Ramallah, and Egypt. What did he achieve?" Charge responded Mitchell's focus had been on supporting Palestinian reconciliation. "Ok, we'll address reconciliation," Muallim replied, abruptly cutting off the conversation to pursue another topic.

¶12. (SBU) Acting A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director Shapiro cleared this message.

